

Che Lives!

Like God and Lucifer, Darryl F. Zanuck of Twentieth Century-Fox and Fidel Castro of twentieth-century Cuba are vying for the immortal remains of Che Guevara. Castro's Cuba put Che in a Latin American pantheon for martyred guerrilla saints after his death in Bolivia last year, and Che's admirers have covered walls all over the world with posters of his darkly handsome face. Now Zanuck's Fox is making its own myth with a movie called "Che!" and studio hagiographers are working toward a time next spring when the movie will be released and Che's followers will find that their posters are actually portraits of Omar Sharif.

The resemblance is real: strong bones, dark eyes, full black mane, mustache and beard. Lucky for the world's downtrodden masses that Che didn't look like Peter Lorre. "Having this facial resemblance," Sharif says, "I'm trying not to do too much more. I'm taking all the craft from the acting, just leaving the bare bones." He sits in his silent hotel room in Ponce, Puerto Rico, high above the shantytown cockerows and the infants screaming "Mami!" Fox is shooting its "Che!" locations in Puerto Rico because of the island's typical Latin American landscapes and atypical amity toward the United States. Commonwealth status has made Puerto Rico safe for Hollywood's revolutionists.

Sharif is loafing in air-conditioned comfort today, but he spent most of the previous week slogging through mud for guerrilla-warfare sequences. The mud was in a rain forest 90 minutes and 461 mountain curves away from Ponce by car. The curves were counted by a German make-up man who builds a new nose for Jack Palance each morning so Palance will be completely faithful to Fidel Castro. Authenticity is stressed in every detail of production. It declined to rain in the rain forest, but the mud was authentic enough.

There is authentic novelty, too, in a Hollywood studio leaping to do the life story of a dedicated enemy of the United States. (Che died Oct. 8, 1967. An Italian film about him, starring Francisco Rabal, has already been finished. Other directors contemplating Che movies include Italy's Franco Rosi and England's Tony Richardson.) Whether the Fox production will demonstrate capitalism's internal contradictions or its invincible adaptability is a moot point, but it is difficult to imagine a Cuban film studio, say, doing a melodrama called "Ruski!"

Fox's publicity department is nervous about "Che!" and stresses the film's "objectivity." The script, one press agent says, "goes straight down the middle of the road politically." Rather than discuss Che's politics, most of the cast and pro-



Palance, Sharif: 'When you analyze it, Che is a big loser'

duction people stress such qualities in their hero as idealism, dedication, courage as a jungle fighter, intelligence and incorruptibility. "Che was uncompromising," Sharif says. "He never copped out. Castro did. Once he entered Havana and became the head of Cuba, that was enough for him."

"To say the film is 100 per cent honest is absurd," Sharif states with calm candor. "It's being made by a bunch of capitalists. But I will say, certainly, that the man himself will be sympathetic, as he should be. He was the sort of man everyone would like to have on his side."

Sharif thinks Che was "totally unsentimental," and the actor puts on an impressive display of unsentimentality himself when he discusses the phenomenon of capitalist Fox putting its money on Communist Che. "A whole younger generation is anti-American," says Sharif. "Not anti-American but anti-Establishment American, and Che Guevara is the ultimate anti-Establishment figure. All over the world people have come to believe that this is a correct position to take." Thus do new American movie markets grow.

"Che!"s director, Richard Fleischer, is trying for "a documentary feeling throughout the film, with hand-held cameras and long lenses." The script, he says, combines dramatized episodes with straight-to-the-camera interviews in which people give conflicting views of Che. "What I'm trying to do," says Fleischer, "is an objective character study of a very complex man." The director sees no undue haste in the production. "We're dealing with one of the phenomena of our time. As of this moment he's a tremendous symbol for young people all over the world. But I'm not so sure that five years from now anyone will remember him, because there's no

residue, no substance to the man. When you analyze it, Che is a big loser."

Fleischer, whose last film was "The Boston Strangler," shares Sharif's view that Che should be played sympathetically. "If at the end of this thing you have compassion for this man I'll be very happy," he says. "Che was an idealist who died for his ideals, and to me that's a heroic thing. Take the Boston Strangler. He did monstrous things, but he wasn't a monster. You feel sorry for him in the end. I think compassion is one of the most important human qualities."

Jack Palance stands in an army truck puffing a cigar on a sweltering Sunday in downtown Ponce and waits for wheels and cameras to roll. This will be Castro's triumphal entrance into Havana. Street vendors hawk shaved-ice cones tintured with fruit syrup. A prop man distributes red and black "26 Julio" pennants for the crowd to wave. One precept of crowd photography—and politics—is that people tend to wave whatever is put into their hands.

"C'mon," an assistant director exhorts the crowd through a bullhorn. "C'mon, now—viva!" The crowd vivas, but mildly. Early this morning Fleischer's staff had dressed, bearded, weaponed and cigared 100 townspeople as guerrillas (the cigar bills run to \$100 a day: 10-cent Roi Tans, made in the U.S.A.), and hired 300 more townspeople to play townspeople, in hopes that these 400 extras would attract many more hundreds of passers-by. So far their hopes are deceived. As triumphal entrances go, this one is on the intimate side. Much will be done with editing and sound, though, to suggest vast throngs. If movies, as Jean-Luc Godard says, are the truth 24 times a second, they can also generate an equal frequency of fibs.

The next shot has Fidel on a podium,

haranguing the crowd. Palanca gives an enormous, accurate performance, full of bravura and saliva, but the crowd keeps mostly mum except for giggles. "His mustache is falling off," people whisper. The cameras stop. The mustache is fixed. Palanca resumes his litany of anti-Yankeeisms in the peaceful Ponce plaza. The Puerto Ricans still refuse to respond to off-camera cues. Suddenly Palanca pounds the podium with his fist. This happens to be characteristic not only of Castro but of Puerto Rico's governor-elect, Luis A. Ferré. The townspeople finally roar their approval. Palanca has the crowd in the heel of his hand.

Next day, the company's last in Puerto Rico before returning to Hollywood, "Chel" moves to San Germán, the island's oldest town. Here it will shoot what another press agent calls "some atrocity-type shots" to show how the Batista regime brought about its own downfall. A stunt man dangles, hanged, from the branch of a laurel tree standing in the Plaza Francisco Mariano Quiñones. Two girls in black keen over the corpse. Onlookers wait until Fleischer calls "cut," then applaud gaily. The next shot calls for women in mourning to be clubbed and beaten by Batista troops. Most of the mourners are women from the village and under strict orders to remain out of combat. Those who will take the actual clubbing are stunt men dressed in widow's weeds, rouge and pink bloomers. Cameras roll, troops and mourners collide, rubber clubs and rifle butts fly. The transvestite stunt men hit the pavement as planned, but many village women do, too, swept into the fray by their rampaging emotions. The spectators love this grisly game of oppressor and victim and cheer wildly from the other side of the square. It is a festive day for San Germán.